

Agency Rules

NEVER AN EASY DAY AT THE OFFICE

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**KHALID
MUHAMMAD**

Celebrated as a ragtag force that defeated and broke the Soviet Union, no one predicted the Mujahideen would bring with them a plague that would spread like wildfire through Pakistan in the years to follow. When the battle-worn fighters returned with no enemy or war to fight, they turned their sights on the country that had been their creator and benefactor.

From the same battlegrounds that birthed the Mujahideen, a young Kamal Khan emerges as a different breed of warrior. Discarding his wealthy family comforts, Kamal becomes a precision sniper, an invincible commando and a clandestine operative bringing intimidation, dominance and death with him to the battlefield. Ending the plague is his prime directive.

Shrouded in political expediency, hampered by internal power struggles, international espionage and doublespeak that makes Washington's spin doctors proud, Kamal's mission is a nightmare of rampant militant fundamentalism that threatens to choke and take Pakistan hostage. For him, the fight is not just for freedom, but the survival of a nation.



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Agency Rules:

Never an Easy Day at the Office

By

Khalid Muhammad



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To all those who supported and encouraged me throughout the process of creating and writing Agency Rules, I wish I could list you all but there would be too many names.

Thank You!



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CHAPTER 1

Nine months ago, the Muslim League government had won a surprising mandate across Pakistan on a manifesto that was full of promises that would be difficult, if not impossible, to deliver. One of their core promises was returning Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolis and economic hub, back to a peaceful existence.

Since his party's election victory, Prime Minister Azam Shah had struggled with difficult questions on the actual implementation of his manifesto that had gotten them elected, but had never seemed to provide any clear or direct answers. One thing he had clearly demonstrated was his intense love for the cameras and media spotlight during his political events. As the opposition leader in the previous government, he had taken great pleasure in highlighting the failings and bad decisions of the sitting government. Today, however, was a different story as his government was now in power and he was regularly in the hot seat. During a tour of a children's hospital in his native Multan, the Prime Minister was again posturing for the media. As the visit drew to a close, the newly minted Prime Minister sauntered to the podium as if he had won an award, unserious and jovial, until a staunch critic of the government posed a difficult question.

"Prime Minister, you have occupied the most powerful seat in the country for almost nine months now. Do you not see it as a failure that your government has not drafted any policy to address the violence in Karachi?"

It was not the first time it has been asked, but it was the first time the word 'failure' had been introduced into the public debate. As he looked around the gaggle of journalists, each thrusting forward to capture his next words on their recorders, he knew this would be the lead headline for the rest of the day, opening the door for opposition and coalition parties to criticize his inaction.

He measured his response, almost rehearsing the words in his mind before speaking. "I think it's too early to use words like failure. When we were not the ruling party, our information was limited to what the previous government wanted us to know. Now, we have more intelligence about the situation, and I am briefed daily."

Journalists started firing follow-up questions at him before he could complete his response. He held up his hands to try to bring the situation back under control.

"Just a minute, may I finish my response before you start your follow-ups?" he asked, trying to assert his position, but even he knew he had less than thirty seconds to finish and get away before he was cornered by the wolves stalking their prey.

"The government has had several meetings with all the stakeholders, both collectively and individually, over the past few months to ascertain the best course of action," he continued hesitantly, knowing he had been repeating this for months now. He knew he wouldn't win any favors by repeating himself. Just then, he felt a hand on his side and saw a note placed before him on the podium. Quickly scanning the note, he flashed a semi-smile. "Next week, we will bring everyone together to decide the final course of action."

He moved hastily from the podium to his waiting motorcade, effectively ending the press

conference and avoiding any additional questions. As the motorcade pulled away from the hospital, the Prime Minister looked beaten to his party colleagues. He had not been ready to discuss the Karachi policy, which they knew had not been formulated, much less ready to finalize by next week.

It was going to be a difficult week for Prime Minister Shah and his spokespeople. Pandora's box had been opened.

Since the Prime Minister's briefing, the political parties had taken turns hurling barbs at each other in the media, leveraging the lack of decision-making from the Prime Minister's Secretariat. Rumors of operations and punitive action made their rounds on the evening talk shows, as the death toll rose in the city. The provincial government had pulled out all the stops to empower law enforcement agencies to take a heavy hand to criminals and terrorists, collectively known as miscreants. The miscreants in the city had become emboldened by the police ineffectiveness, and the provincial government's unwillingness to call out the armed forces to return Karachi to a city of peace.

Inside the National Assembly's cabinet meeting room, a group of select representatives of the federal and provincial governments and the armed forces came together to find a solution. Around the table sat the political leadership of the province, heads of various law enforcement agencies, the intelligence services and armed forces, with the Federal Interior Minister chairing the meeting. The political leadership was divided between increasing the mandate of the law enforcement agencies and calling the army into the city.

The debate spanned hours, with each side arguing the benefits of their positions, before the Interior Minister finally turned to General Ali, who, along with his colleagues, had thus far been a spectator at the meeting.

"General Ali," said the Federal Interior Minister, as the room descended into pin drop silence. "What if we call out the army?"

General Amjad Ali, the Chief of Army Staff, was the highest-ranking military officer in the country. Over his two-year tenure, he had gained international support for his extreme patience with the civilian government and was the person that every diplomat knew held all the power, no matter who sat in the Prime Minister's chair. Having sat in numerous meetings like this one, his patience with the civilian government's political posturing had worn thin, but his respect for the uniform he wore had kept him from bitch slapping all of them. Before the meeting, he had warned the Interior Minister not to put him in a position where he would have to undermine the political leadership in the province or the nation's capital. It irked him, therefore, that his advice had been ignored.

"Minister sahib, you know that the army is not the solution to this problem," said the General, pulling a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros in front of him. The room sat anxiously awaiting the General's next words.

He shook the box of matches, echoing in the large hall, before pulling a match and running it across the side. The smell of tobacco mixed with the sulfur in the air as he took a long drag. "The army is a broadsword that is used to cut down anything in their path. You don't want us deployed in Karachi."

"General, if the Prime Minister gives the order to send in the army..." said the Federal

Interior Minister, but the General put his hand up to stop him before he completed the sentence.

“Why would the Prime Minister give such an order, Mr. Chaudhry?” the General leaned forward to put out the barely smoked cigarette. “Would *you* advise him to do such a foolish thing? Are you tired of being in government already?” A barely noticeable sneer crept across his battle-worn face.

The Muslim League’s eight months in government had seen them struggle with every decision on how to solve Pakistan’s problems. Ahsan Chaudhry, the Federal Interior Minister, was a Harvard graduate but inexperienced for the position that he held. He was, however, extremely close to Prime Minister Azam Shah and many felt that he would make the decision for the sitting government.

“General Ali, I don’t like your tone or implication,” retorted Chaudhry. “The Prime Minister takes recommendations from every stakeholder and then makes his decision.”

The General grimly looked at him, as a father would his child after catching them in a lie, and turned to speak with the Director General of the Inter Services Intelligence. After a few minutes of muted conversation between the two, General Ali leaned back in his chair to think for a moment. Pulling a second cigarette from the pack, he tapped it against the table.

“Minister sahib,” the General started, as the air filled with the smell of sulfur again. “There is no media here to record this and we will all assume that no one will speak with them about the internal conversations held here.” He shook the match to extinguish the flame and dropped it into the ashtray, now overflowing with barely-smoked cigarettes. “You all understand that the army would be the most extreme response to the situation, correct? That calling the military into the streets of an urban center will lead to more problems than solutions?”

The General didn’t pause for an answer. “I tasked the intelligence services two months ago to develop a list of key individuals involved in the unrest in Karachi. They have provided me with a list of over 1000 people, including politicians, business people, bureaucrats and police, that are involved in the activities, support, financing and management of roughly five gangs.”

“I take great offense to the implication that my police officers or politicians would be involved in the unrest in Karachi, General,” sputtered Murad Khan, Chief Minister Sindh. “These are baseless allegations that have been made repeatedly by the media. We are not involved! Why have these lists not been shared with our government? Why were we not made aware that these activities were being carried out by the intelligence services?”

“CM sahib, you don’t wear a uniform, so these lists,” the General held up the file in the air, “are none of your business. This is routine activity for the intelligence services to identify those who are involved in anti-state activities. We are not formally calling them anti-state, but we do know these people now.”

“Your intelligence is faulty,” declared the Inspector General Police and Chief Minister in unison.

“These are just hit lists of people that the General wants to eliminate,” continued the Inspector General Police.

The General ignored the interruption. "These documents provide us with a complete list of those people involved, but be clear on a few things. You don't want us in Karachi. We don't make mistakes, no matter what those sitting around this table and in the media would like to think. We will hunt them down. We will find them in their hiding places. We will kill them. We ask that you not consider this option because we don't want Pakistanis and Karachites looking over their shoulders wondering if the army is coming for them. No city can function in fear."

The room buzzed with discontent at the General's statement. The provincial and federal leadership clearly wanted the lists to be shared, and they began to voice their demands loudly and insistently.

It didn't take long for the situation to escalate to counter-accusations that the ISI was behind it all to destabilize the new government.

Chief Minister Khan, letting his anger boil over, yelled at the General. "You just want the situation to get worse so that you can take the country over again! That is what the Pakistan Army does!"

At this sally, the Corps Commander Karachi leaned forward in his seat, flipped on the microphone before him and, without looking at the General, said, "And whose fault is that? We are sitting here today watching the largest urban center in Pakistan burn because the political leadership can't stop blaming everyone else long enough to find a solution!"

Lieutenant General Bilal Siddiqui, Corps Commander Karachi, had spent months in meetings with this same group of provincial leaders discussing the same problem. He had seen the in-fighting between the various political stakeholders, the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement agencies and the lack of resolve from the courts to take any real action against those who committed these crimes, much less any action to take out the ones who masterminded the activities. In past meetings, he had held his tongue, but the behavior of the Chief Minister was beyond what was acceptable. "I have repeatedly told you all that there are rogue forces in your parties and organizations that are benefiting from this unrest. Have you taken any action to remove these people? No! Now, you want to create a conspiracy theory that the military wants to allow this to continue?" the Lt. General was contemptuous. "No, sir. I will not allow that."

Chaudhry waited to make sure that the General had completed his point, before asking, "Do you have any other options to resolve this problem? We have empowered the police and paramilitary but have not been able to shut down the gang warfare."

"We have a number of options," said the Lt. General. "We know who is involved and we know how to stop them. Since the political leadership, police and paramilitary forces have not been able to get this under control, we don't feel a need to share this information with anyone at this table."

A stunned silence fell across the room, shocked that the Lt. General was unwilling to disclose potential options for discussion among the civilian government. Chaudhry was the first to break the silence, hoping to stave off another round of heated accusations.

"General, you need to share the options with us otherwise we cannot decide a proper course of action."

The Corps Commander looked towards his commanding officer, who remained maddeningly casual, before turning back to Chaudhry. "Frankly, Minister sahib, army command does not feel the need to open that discussion here."

"You do understand that the Prime Minister and Chief Minister need to approve any action?" Chaudhry sensed that he had lost control of the situation. "How do you carry out what you are planning without their approval?"

The room fell into deafening silence as the Lt. General briefly conferred with the uniformed army personnel sitting around him. The political leadership strained to decipher the low murmur of the private conference, unsuccessfully. In a mockery of a synchronized event, the leadership sat back in their chairs just as the uniformed members turned back to the table.

General Ali sat forward, turned his microphone on again. "If we were to go to the Prime Minister for approval for all our actions inside the country, we would not have most of the intelligence that we have. You need to eliminate the thought from your mind that the Pakistan Army operates under the purview of the Prime Minister or any other member of government."

The room erupted with objections and accusations that the military was operating as a state within a state, but General Ali chuckled at the accusations, simply stating, "Why should today be any different than any other day in Pakistan?"

Five kilometers down the road from the National Assembly stood a nondescript building that housed Pakistan's premier spy agency. Anyone standing outside the gates would never know that this was where one of the world's most feared intelligence services was based.

Inside, in a cold, long room furnished only with a mahogany table, twenty men had gathered for a briefing that would change their military careers.

Colonel Akbar, a veteran of the Afghanistan resistance against the Soviets and a master of guerrilla warfare, stood before his team. Colonel Akbar had trained the mujahideen to fight the Soviets, who were better armed and better trained than the guerrillas, but unable to fight a resistance force in the mountains and streets. He had been part of the ISI's counter-insurgency force for decades and an expert on guerrilla warfare for the agency.

"This operation has two very simple objectives," the Colonel explained to the group. "First, we want to cut off all their supply lines, revenue sources and organizational structure. Second, we want to inflict extreme pain on those who finance and support these activities in the city. We will have one group that will be responsible for intelligence gathering and target identification. A second group will implement the go orders. A third team will clean up the aftermath of the go order, and lastly, an administrative team will document and report information up the chain of command.

"Your presence and activities will be unknown to anyone outside of the people in this room, the Corps Commander, Director General ISI and the Chief of Army Staff." The Colonel paused to let the words sink in. "If you're not willing to follow these rules, stand up

and leave the room now,” he continued. Five soldiers hesitantly stood, glanced around the room for other supporters, but finding none, they started for the door. The Colonel called out to them.

“Take those uniforms off when you leave the room. They are worn by men and you ladies don’t fall into that category.” That single statement froze them in their tracks. Each turned to look at the Colonel, wondering if their military careers had just ended. “There is nothing here for you. I’ll be speaking with your commanding officers before the day is over. Dismissed, ladies.”

He waited for the door to close and returned to the group before him. “Anyone else? This is your only chance to walk away.”

Each man shook his head, assenting to their participation, and the Colonel knew he had his wet team. “This army is charged with defending the country from both internal and external threats. This agency is primarily responsible for intelligence and covert actions outside our borders, but there are times when both must work together to restore order.”

He picked up the glass on the table behind him. “We face an internal threat today that should have been controlled by civilian law enforcement agencies, but they have sold their souls to the devil and the devil is collecting his due.” He motioned to the men to gather round the table. He pulled a thick plastic file forward, and flipped it open, pulling out a number of maps, papers and photographs.

Over the next three hours, the Colonel broke down the covert action, identified targets, methods and required end results. Having trained the Mujahideen, he had an intimate knowledge of maneuvering within an occupied city and how to extract information from hostiles. “All means at our disposal will be used to neutralize this problem permanently and serve as a warning to anyone who dares to do it again. Ajmal, Amjad and Basit, you are Alpha team. You will serve as the on-ground eyes and ears for the operation, coordinating intelligence with our existing network. Dawood, Aftab and Kamal, Omega team, you will implement. Kamran, Moin and Riaz, Charlie team, support the implementers. You do what they tell you to do,” the Colonel barked out. “The remaining six will be operational support. You keep track of the targets neutralized and report to me. Is everyone clear on their mission?”

They all spoke, as if someone had pulled a string on their backs, simultaneously. “Yes sir!”

“Men, this country turns to us when everyone else fails. The politicians and police have had their chance and choose to stand with the gangs.” The Colonel relaxed his stance slightly, winding up the briefing. “We cannot fail. Karachi needs us.

“Omega team, I want to speak with you three privately. The rest of you are dismissed. Be ready to travel day after tomorrow.”

Kamal, Dawood and Aftab waited for their colleagues to click their heels and clear the room before spreading out around the table. Kamal’s military career so far had been spent on battlefields with live target practice, sitting in a sniper perch yards from the action. He was precise and detached from the action in many cases, but his burning passion made him an invaluable member to any team. Taking out hostiles, accurately, quickly, and providing

essential cover to his brothers-in-arms was a matter of pride for him.

This is different though, he thought to himself. *There are no uniforms; these are civilians.* The possibility of neutralizing an innocent troubled his mind for a split second before he snapped back to attention. The Colonel was speaking.

“Gentlemen, you have one of the most important responsibilities in this operation. As implementers, your job is not only to get the targets neutralized, but also to strike such fear into the hearts of these gang leaders that they beg to surrender. These people have been allowed to terrorize Pakistanis for too long now.” the Colonel continued. “There will be hostiles on this list that you may have moral issues neutralizing, but these files should help motivate you to do your jobs.”

The Colonel fanned open several photographs and placed them before the three.

Kamal recoiled instantly. Dawood gagged slightly, and Aftab turned away.

They were confronted with photographs of burned, tortured and beaten bodies, each tagged with the names and ages of the victims. Kamal’s stomach churned as he scanned the images, and he could see Dawood and Aftab were struggling as well. *What the fuck? This is bloody nauseating.*

“These people were ordinary citizens targeted because they had successful businesses, supported law enforcement or just got in the way of a gang’s expansion,” Colonel Akbar told them. “Show them the same mercy they showed those in their hands. Ruthless is countered with ruthless. Our politicians, police and judges have shown that they are intimidated, or in league with them. We don’t have fear. We create and exploit it.”

Later, sitting in the canteen with his team members, Kamal found himself recalling the pictures in the file. Each of the pictures had been tagged with names and descriptions of the deceased, and he now had names to go with the faces of the victims. It smoothed away the split second of doubt he had experienced during the briefing, but his stomach continued to churn. Kamal knew that Dawood had actually parted with his breakfast right after the briefing.

Early next morning, the team gathered at Chaklala Air Base, scheduled to fly to Karachi on a C-130 with their required equipment. Not every military invasion requires hundreds of men and a convoy of military hardware; some are designed to move with deadly precision. This mission was silent and surgical, meant to disrupt all that the criminal mafias held sacred. Karachi would not be the same once they were done.

CHAPTER 2

From his perch on top of a seven-story apartment block, Kamal watched the people below move through their daily lives. There was a fruit seller in the far corner shouting to passersby, trying to draw attention to his wares. Just a few shops down was a lone waiter at a *chapli kebab* house trying to keep up with the demands of the numerous customers screaming their orders. Small tables crowded the wide pavement at a small *chai* hotel, partly obscured by the smoke billowing from the giant *tawwa* placed prominently outside. The faint sound of music, and the raucous yell of vendors and shopkeepers floated up in snatches to where Kamal was hidden. This was the life of the Pathans in Sohrab Goth, located in the north of Karachi; it was the gateway for immigrants to the city. From here, they would set their way and start their lives in Pakistan's largest metropolitan center.

Kamal shifted imperceptibly in his position, careful not to disturb the rifle hidden under foliage beside him. He had found a spot with the sun behind him, to minimize glare off the scope, and he had been out there for hours. *It's a lonely job*, Kamal thought to himself. Kamal had learned in the battlefield that his instincts were rarely wrong, but that was a battlefield. There it was clear who the enemy was, but in an urban center, enemies were never clearly marked. The decision to pull the trigger on a target was his own, and it meant Kamal had to pay closer attention to where a potential threat could come from and how it would manifest itself.

This was the tenth day of surveillance, and Kamal's body was stiff every evening when he descended to the flat they had rented in the building. The operational command, Major Imtiaz, wanted him close to the theatre so response to any untoward incidents could be covert, quick and decisive.

The flat was a small, dingy affair, barely 800 square feet of prime real estate in an overcrowded city. Residents kept to themselves, which was a huge advantage, but Kamal still preferred to remain in the shadows. The front door opened into a small living area and kitchenette. The room was dark when he entered—not unusual, as his colleagues were still watching the streets below through slits in the blinds.

Kamal made a small sound to attract their attention. Even though the neighboring flat was empty, they were habitually careful with their movements. In silence, Captains Dawood and Aftab joined Kamal at the counter, and they exchanged notes on their potential targets, and possible persons of interest.

By the time they were done, Kamal was afraid his bones would creak if he moved too fast. But as soon as he was free, he moved towards the back bedroom. Quickly and efficiently, he stripped off his sweat-stained clothes, and took a silent sponge bath in the tiny en suite bathroom. Barely fifteen minutes later, he lowered himself onto the bed, and finally allowed his mind to wander.

Just eleven days ago (it already felt like a lifetime), he'd gotten into a jeep with six fellow

army officers, driving away from the base where he was stationed. The base shrunk behind them as they drove down a secluded road towards a series of hangers far from any signs of life. It became clear that no one was supposed to know who came in on the flight, as the C-130 was turned around and went racing past them into the air, back to Rawalpindi.

Pulling closer, Kamal noticed the dilapidated hangers with paint chipping from the exterior walls, and the light over the entrance broken. These hangers were purposely made to look this way. They were sequestered to a far off section of the air base so that they would seem inconspicuous and hide the actual purpose of their usage.

The doors of the hanger were thrown open as the jeeps pulled closer and were quickly ushered inside with the entry doors slammed behind. Inside stood a man in fatigues smoking a cigar, surrounded by a group of men, tables and bulletin boards. The only light in the entire hanger hung above the man, slightly swaying from the rush of air that entered behind the jeeps.

Major Imtiaz was a seasoned officer and the commander on the ground in Karachi. He had gained his guerrilla experience under the watchful eye of Colonel Akbar in Bajaur and Kashmir and was one of the top interrogators in the Pakistan Army. Credited with breaking Soviet soldiers and operatives during the Afghan conflict, Indian soldiers in Kashmir and many others that were only known from the intelligence gathered in foreign missions. He had been honored with the title Quizmaster.

He had delivered the team's final briefing, updating them on the situation along with the latest intelligence on their targets. His files had included the location of the dingy apartment where the omega team was holed up.

A rough hand on his shoulder woke Kamal from his sleep, unclear and groggy.

"Kamal, get to the roof," hissed Dawood. "We have trucks moving. They're loaded."

"Where's Aftab?" Kamal asked scanning the room.

"He's next door on the radio. We need Major Imtiaz's authorization before we take any action," replied a tense Dawood. "Get moving!"

Kamal hesitated for a moment, then stepped to the wash basin to splash cold water on his face and over his head. Turning towards the door, he grabbed his .308 Lapua and started for the stairs. Climbing quickly, he slipped the comms device into his ear, flipping it on with his thumb. He gave his call-sign, "Omega 1. Check one, two, three. Check one, two, three. Command, do you copy?"

"Omega 1, this is Alpha 1. Hold for confirmation and authorization," came the easily recognizable voice of Ajmal. "Repeat, hold for confirmation and authorization."

Kamal reached the roof, set his weapon in place and settled into the perch he had created. Adjusting his sight for wind and trajectory, Kamal brought the first truck of the convoy into the crosshairs, moved to the second and finally the third. Working without a spotter, Kamal understood that the possibility for error was strong but another person on the roof could potentially expose their location. He scanned the targets and environment, looking for any hostiles that may be watching, holding his position as he waited for the go order in his ear.

"Omega 1, order confirmed. Authorization granted for lethal force," came the voice in his ear. "Repeat, order confirmed. Authorization granted for lethal force. Confirm kill."

In sniper training, one of the first things taught was the ability to ignore the environment and concentrate on the target. Phasing out the background allowed the sniper to hone in on what mattered to him, the target. Kamal's mind went blank to his surrounding as he settled his body into a familiar drape across the floor. Moving his scope from one to the other and then the last, Kamal weighed his options and made his decision. His finger twitched with anticipation against the trigger, as he slowed his heartbeat. Slowly adjusting his rifle sight, Kamal focused on the fuel tanks and pulled the trigger, releasing two rounds into the quiet of the night, leaving only a faint hiss as they propelled toward the target.

"Alpha 1, round away, impact in 5 seconds. 4, 3, 2, 1. Command, target 1 down," Kamal quietly said into the comm unit, as the quiet night filled with the sound of the explosion in the first truck's gas tank. He had seconds to neutralize the remaining trucks before they would bug out. Turning his sight towards the third truck, Kamal adjusted his sight as the trucks attempted to reverse away from the brightly burning lead truck. *Steady, steady*, Kamal thought to himself, as his finger hugged the trigger and pulled to propel the round toward its intended target.

"Alpha 1, round away, impact in 8 seconds. Command target 3 down," Kamal reported. "Target two attempting to bug out but trapped between initial targets."

"Omega 1, confirm third hostile," came another voice in his ear. "Confirm third hostile down."

He watched the middle truck of the convoy rocking back and forth, trying to find any escape route from the assault. From the corner of his sight, Kamal saw the men jumping from escort vehicles; weapons raised, looking for the direction of the assault. Like idiots, they moved closer to the last remaining truck, thinking that they were going to be able to save it. Kamal waited. *Come on...closer...closer...don't be afraid. Today you die*. With a sneer on his face and a snap, he let loose the final round, hurtling towards the last truck. Kamal pulled away from the rifle sight to watch as the round split the air, leaving a slight tracer behind it. He had always admired the accuracy of his work.

"Alpha 1, round away. Hostiles in the range. Command target two down. Confirmed ten hostiles neutralized." Kamal spoke emotionlessly into the comms unit. He heard several smaller explosions from below as the munitions within the trucks detonated. Flames rose up in the air in concert with short bursts of explosions from all three trucks. It had taken six shots to take out the targets. *Like a boxer*, Kamal thought to himself, *three punches and down for the count*.

"Alpha 1, Omega 1 bugging out," Kamal said to the voice on the other side. "Targets neutralized. Bonus ten hostiles neutralized. Munitions destroyed. It will be a safer morning in Karachi today."

"Omega 1, well done. Return to watcher positions," said the voice.

On the battlefield, Kamal was a legend with his Winchester and Lapua, affectionately known as his ladies. He had always taken great satisfaction in the kills that he had registered with a sickening frequency. This kill was different. It was his first urban takedown and it produced a rush of adrenaline that he could not explain. As he slowly descended the stairs to the flat, he could hear the sirens outside. He knew that every resident in the complex was now

awake and watching the show, wondering if terrorists had struck again.

Miles away in the Garden district, a ringing phone interrupted the screams of pain coming from a makeshift torture chamber. Inside the chamber, a young police officer who recently been transferred to Karachi's gang violence unit from Lahore was tied to a rickety chair and bleeding profusely. His crime was simple. He had slighted Minto in his own territory. For Minto, there was no such thing as a slight too small and this copper had dared to ask for a bribe from one of Minto's top lieutenants and revenue generators. Hanif, a graduate of Minto's academy of mayhem, was masterful in his ability to cause panic with small explosives. When he wasn't creating mayhem, he ran one of the most efficient drug distribution networks in the city, able to move product to any location in any quantity and on a moment's notice. His successes were impressive and had earned him his place within Minto's inner circle.

Minto pulled the knife out of the police officer's leg, wiping the blade clean on the copper's hair, and called for someone to bring him the phone. Minto's place as the top Don in the city had been earned by killing all those who came before him and anyone who dared to challenge him. He was ruthless in his dispensation of justice to those who crossed him and feared by crime lords and top cops in the city alike. He was Minto sahib to them all; no one dared to call him by any other name.

By the time the phone reached Minto's bloody hand, the ringing had stopped. Minto glared at his victim, who made a desperate attempt to stop his groans of pain, and in the ensuing silence, the phone started to ring again. A blood-covered hand picked up the receiver.

"What?" Minto barked into the phone.

"Minto gee...we have...lost the trucks," came the wavering voice of Absar. Delivering bad news to Minto was a dangerous gamble. Messengers invariably suffered a gruesome fate at his hands. "We were hit. The...the weapons are destroyed. Ten of our boys are dead and I have no idea where the shots were fired from."

Minto froze. *Lost the trucks? How is that possible?*

"Motherfucker, what happened?" Minto yelled into the phone. *Which son of a bitch would dare target one of my transports?*

Absar's scrambling and somewhat incoherent explanation raised Minto's anger by several notches, but he got the gist of it. *Which fucking crime boss is making his move?* Minto wanted answers and wanted them now.

"Who the fuck would go after our transport? Don't they know that their lives would belong to me?" Minto screamed at Absar. His ruddy face turned red which, added to his dark complexion, turned it a deep maroon color. It terrified the man in chair who had already pissed himself once that night. He pissed again at the rage in Minto's voice. "Bring me the Pathans who were supposed to supply these weapons!"

A simple reply came from the other side, drowned out by the sound of sirens, "I'll get it done, Minto gee."

Minto slammed down the receiver, then took the phone and bashed it against his prisoner's head, beating him unconscious only to revive him again for another beating. The police officer was running on empty and Minto was doing everything possible to bring his

life to a painful end. With the expertise of a butcher, Minto picked up his knife and weaved a trail into his skin, peeling away portions of flesh. When the screaming became overwhelmingly loud, Minto stuffed a dirty rag that he had been using to wipe his hands into the policeman's mouth.

Looking down on the collapsed man, Minto grabbed a bowl of water to throw on him. "How much would you pay me to end your life right now?" He threw the full bowl of water on his face, watching pink rivulets stream off the man onto the filthy floor.

The police officer awoke screaming in pain. His only thought was, *please God, when will this end?*

With one quick swipe of his seven inch Ka-Bar knife, Minto severed his victim's carotid artery, answering his prayers. He signaled to the men standing in a darkened corner of the room.

"Dispose of this," he said, pointing to the body. He grabbed his phone and snapped a picture for his collection. "Make sure to leave it somewhere for the public to enjoy," he said as he left the small chamber. He lumbered into a room a few steps away — his 'office' — and threw himself onto a *charpai* to get some sleep. Torture was exhausting.

Kamal had not slept comfortably the night before. Sohrab Goth was abuzz with activity as fire trucks came in and out of the area throughout the night. During breakfast before daybreak, Aftab gave both Kamal and Dawood a briefing into the activities observed during his watch. At some point during the night, the police had cordoned off the area, restricting access to official personnel and vehicles only. A few military convoys had come into the area, including the Corps Commander and Military Intelligence, to survey the situation and offer their assistance, but this was a police matter and the army wanted nothing to do with it.

As the sun peaked over the horizon, Kamal was back in his position in the perch, rifle positioned and watching the area below. The charred remains of the three trucks were starkly black along the narrow street. People stilled milled around and the makeshift restaurants and hotels were packed as curiosity drove people to find out what they could about last night's events. They kept their distance from the crime scene, but only because of the cordon. Kamal knew that if that hadn't been there, the public would have been picking up souvenirs from the rubble. *One thing about this city, it's resilient.*

Today was hotter than ever and lying under the sun unable to move, Kamal felt the sweat sticking to his chest. *I'm going to have to dissolve this shirt with a solvent to get it off.* There were times that he envied the roles of Dawood and Aftab, sitting inside the flat with a fan running above them, taking some of the sting out of the heat. *How the fuck did I end up with this shit assignment?* With a sigh, he picked up his binoculars. *Time for some good old peeking.*

Aftab was out in the market below. Dressed in a blue *shalwar kameez*, he blended into the scene, but Kamal picked him up easily. Aftab stopped at the fruit seller Kamal had watched the day before, picking up some seasonal fruit. *Get the apples*, Kamal tried to telepathically

send a message to Aftab. *Damn, not the falsas.* Kamal shook his head in disgust; he hated the tart, tiny purple fruit. He thought about using his rifle to blow a hole into the bag of *falsas*, but that would give away his position. He thought about calling Aftab, but stopped when he saw Aftab moving towards the weapons warehouse. Kamal dropped the binoculars and moved into position behind his rifle, quickly adjusting for range and trajectory. *What the hell is he doing? This wasn't discussed this morning.* He watched.

Aftab slowly made his way closer to the building and struck up a conversation with the men standing outside. Aftab was from Charsadda, on the outskirts of Peshawar, and fluent in Pashto, making blending in easier. He stood for what seemed like an eternity talking to them, and then reached into his pocket to pull out a cell phone. With a wave, he moved away from the men, talking on the phone as he slowly walked back to the apartment building.

Kamal continued to track Aftab, doing his best to read Aftab's lips. He felt a prickle of nerves along his skin. He could make out the words 'gangs' and an emphatic 'what' from Aftab, and Kamal realized that something had happened elsewhere in the sprawling city. *Had the gangs retaliated for the warehouse strike already?* Almost instantly, he felt the vibration of his phone and Kamal instinctively reached up and activated the Bluetooth device in his ear. The voice said one phrase before going dark again. "Activate secure comms."

CHAPTER 3

He hadn't had a chance to visit the tourist spots at Seaview or enjoy a hut at Sandspit, nor had he had the chance to visit a shopping mall or eat food at Barbecue Tonight — something he had really been looking forward to. No, Kamal was like a bird sitting atop buildings, taking in sights that no one wanted to admit existed in the city of lights. His six months had been spent prostrate, binoculars pressed to his eyes, watching targets in Sohrab Goth, Malir, Lyari and Orangi Town. He had grown accustomed to the sun beating down on him, baking him to a crisp. Karachi, unlike the scenic mountainous area he grew up in, was humid and hot, reaching desert temperatures at times. In the areas he'd visited, pollution and population had even blocked out the sea breeze the city was famous for. He was sure that his color had gotten two shades darker, matching the shift in his personality, as he watched the gruesome gang war escalate.

In six months, the team had neutralized over two hundred criminals involved in gang-related violence, snatched another hundred that had been interrogated for valuable information. These detainees had not been handed over to civilian courts, which were paralyzed by the fear of reprisals; they were in the safe hands of the military tribunal located within a secret prison guarded by fellow SSG commandos. History had taught the army that jails and prisons were not secure, but a prison that no one knew existed facilitated the army in intelligence gathering and swift justice.

Sadly, with any escalation of violence, there were innocent casualties from Karachi as well, as law enforcement, paramilitary and citizens became the targets in the fight to control the city. *This was war*, Kamal thought to himself as he sat reading the latest briefing in another cramped, rented apartment, *and war has never been for the faint of heart*. The only plus point of the escalation was that the remaining gang bosses were settling scores in the hope to fill the void left by the neutralized, effectively reducing Kamal and his team's workload.

The interrogations had yielded results and volumes of intelligence were passed to the analysts sitting within the ISI command center in Karachi for verification and target selection. It had been through these renditions that many of the top gang bosses and their hideouts had been identified for surveillance, where Kamal and his team would move into action again. But today was different. Kamal had been tapped by the command to actively participate in an interrogation.

Six months ago, Kamal would have never been able to use the force and intimidation required to get information from a detainee, and had proven it in his first entry to the Chamber. He was so gentle and controlled that the detainee openly mocked him, comparing him to a child asking for ice cream. He had experienced psychological torture during his SSG training where he was taught the difference between tone and force.

"Tone is used to create fear within a subject," his instructor taught. "Force is the

realization of that fear.” A good interrogator used tone with the threat of force to gather intelligence. While effective, with tougher targets this method was questionable because the subject could pepper lies into the story. A great interrogator used force to connect a verbal demand with the real pain of non-compliance, a single trait that differentiated field interrogators gathering information from the quizmasters that were relied upon to deliver results. In simple terms, the difference between boys and men.

Today, Kamal stood on the other side of the glass as an observer while Dawood questioned Absar. But as the interview progressed, Kamal realized that Dawood wasn't getting anything of value from Absar.

“Look, we know that you're Minto's number two. There is very little that we don't know about you,” Dawood calmly said. “The best option for you is to be cooperative and you might see the light of day again.”

“Fuck you, motherfucker,” fired Absar. “You can't break me. You know why? You're a bitch! That's all you are.”

Dawood, visibly angered and aware that Kamal was watching, slammed his hand down on the table and grabbed Absar's throat, squeezing until his face turned a bright shade of red.

“You think I won't shove a hot piece of rebar up your ass to get what I want?” Dawood was menacingly quiet. “I'll rip you the fuck open, reach inside you and pull out the information I want.”

Absar chuckled as he got his breath back. Looking deep into Dawood's eyes, he smiled viciously and beat his chest with his free hand. “Fuck you! You bitch. A gnat is scarier than you.” Absar growled back. “I can see in your eyes that you have never killed anyone. You don't know the taste of blood.”

Kamal shook his head at the exchange, wondering how Dawood had been selected to be an interrogator. Skimming the files in his hand, Kamal thought about the devastation that these criminals had caused. They survived on maximizing terror and it was likely that any attack on them would yield a far greater retaliation with a significant body count. They had the one person that knew all of Minto's movements, and he was toying with Dawood like a cat playing with a ball of yarn, slapping every attempt at information away with an insult and a laugh.

Commando training taught Kamal that the element of surprise throws everyone from their game. In the past, he had been restricted by military rules of engagement, but these were not members of any military — they were criminals and criminals don't have rules of engagement. He motioned to the soldier standing guard outside the Chamber, instructing him on a change in tactics and direction that the interrogation would now take. As the soldier moved down the hall to gather the required items, Kamal moved back to the window to continue watching the show.

Moments later, gunfire broke out in the hallway. First, shots from a handgun, followed by intermittent automatic weapon fire. Inside the Chamber, Dawood stopped and instinctively reached for his handgun, forgetting that security protocols didn't allow weapons inside the Chamber. As the gunfire intensified, Dawood, now visibly concerned, jolted the door, trying to open it, unsuccessfully. He pounded on the door, yelling to be let out, to unlock the door,

but no response came from the other side. Absar cheered up, visibly.

“We are going to fuck you, soldier boy! My men are coming for me and I’ll taste your blood for a change.” Absar, entertained by the turn in events, jeered at Dawood. “You’re a bitch and I’ll show you what happens to bitches!”

Dawood pressed the intercom, looking for someone to explain the situation outside the Chamber, but only gunfire and static returned from the other side.

“Is there anyone there?” screamed Dawood.

Kamal stood listening to his colleague’s yells, unconcerned and silent, even when the gunfire rushed closer and closer.

Dawood heard voices outside the Chamber as someone shouted instructions to rig the door with explosives. *There’s nowhere to take cover from an explosion*, Dawood thought frantically as he scanned the room, hastily moving to the wall farthest away from the door. Within seconds, an explosion ripped the door from its hinges, blowing it inwards and narrowly missing both Absar and Dawood. Through the dust and shrapnel billowing in the air, two hooded men, covered in blood, entered. One man moved to grab Dawood, but Dawood got the jump on him and crashed him to the ground with a chair to his head, shattering the chair. Before Dawood could recover, the other man had him in a chokehold and was squeezing the life from his body, with Absar screaming his approval from his chained position.

“Kill the fucker!” shouted Absar, as Dawood went limp. “Well done! Minto will be proud of your fight!” The man tossed Dawood’s unconscious body to the ground.

Absar’s face went from hope for his impending freedom to horror as the hooded man turned towards him and, with a hard slap, drew blood from Absar’s gaping mouth.

“You fucking traitor!” the man growled at Absar. “You have dishonored Minto.”

“Wait. No. I haven’t told them anything,” pleaded a confused Absar. This wasn’t the rescue he had been hoping for. He struggled against his chains, knowing that Minto’s retaliation would not only mean his gruesome death, but the murder of all his family members. Minto was known for his sadistic rage. Fear tripped up his tongue. “Wait...they don’t know anything...”

“Shut up, traitor,” the man shouted, taking out his aggression with another backhand and a kidney punch for good measure. “Sir, we have him!”

In the doorway appeared another hooded man, much larger than the other two. He too was covered in blood, with a bloody machete in one hand and petrol can in the other. Wiping the machete on his chest, the man entered the room, spilling petrol at the doorway and drawing a trail to Absar.

“Tell us what you told them, Absar.” The hooded man casually poured petrol around Absar’s chair.

“I didn’t tell them anything! I would never give them Minto!” The smell of petrol permeated Absar’s nostrils — he couldn’t place the man’s voice, which put him at a disadvantage. He knew that these would be his last minutes if he could not convince this man that he had not turned on his master.

The hooded man lifted the petrol can and emptied it over Absar. “Do you think that we

don't know what you've done?" The man's husky voice was soft and calm, a chilling counterpoint to the butt of the bloody machete that slammed into Absar's stomach. Absar doubled over in pain, his mind ticking in overdrive. *This doesn't sound like Minto's man — he sounds too...too educated.* "Tell us now or we'll take your head back to Minto for his trophy wall."

Minto's trophy wall was unknown to anyone outside the circle. It was adorned with photographs of his victims and stuffed human appendages snatched from those that had wronged him. *How did they know about the trophy wall?* Doubt began to muddle Absar's mind.

"We have already added your wife and parents to the trophy wall for your dishonor. If you chose not to cooperate, Minto will add your children alongside your head," the hooded man's husky voice continued, still in that eerily calm tone. Absar looked up in time to see the fist slamming into his face. "Your lovely, young daughter — how old is she now? Sixteen?" The man's face was close to Absar's and he was almost whispering the words into Absar's ear.

Absar's mind began to cloud with the images of his dead wife and parents, and he shivered at the thought of what they would do to his children. He began to doubt his own memories, wondering if something had slipped out during the many interrogations he had endured. *Had my random taunts given them clues?* Absar's body jumped as a needle was pushed into his neck, and a blinding rush of heroin flooded his blood stream. *These were Minto's men,* was his last coherent thought as the drug took hold, pushing him into a make-believe reality.

The hooded man's machete blade cut into Absar's throat, only enough to draw blood, but demonstrated the absolute resolve that these men brought from Minto. The information would be extracted and Absar's children would either be saved or all would perish. Absar's mind raced as he thought of his daughters, whose lives would be at his mercy. *Their beauty and innocence would be gone,* he thought to himself, knowing that Minto would push them into prostitution to pay for the disloyalty of their father. There was only one way to save them; sacrifice himself.

"I told them everything," Absar wept as he recounted the details of each hiding place and Minto's security protocols. The only thing that he could think of was the safety of his children, as the heroin rushed through his bloodstream and polluted his brain. He stumbled in and out of consciousness as the figures moved around the room, not giving him a fixed position to concentrate on. The questions came fast and furious, further muddling Absar's mind, but more information bubbled forward, mixed with his tears and blood.

The men, satisfied that they had gotten all the information they could from him, moved to the doorway. Absar's eyes followed them as best he could.

"My children? Will they be safe?" Absar asked from the cloud of the drug. "Will Minto spare my children?" he screamed at the figure in the doorway. He had a vague impression that he was suddenly alone in the room with his tormentor.

With a pause, Kamal pulled the hood from his head and put a cigar in his mouth. "Minto never had your family," he calmly said, pulling a matchbox from his pocket. He shook it to

focus Absar's mind on the next few seconds. He struck a match, letting the air fill with the smell of sulfur, before lighting his cigar, "but we will."

Kamal took a deep drag and savored the flavor for a moment. Dropping the lit cigar into the puddle of petrol, he headed towards the hallway that led out of the Chamber. His work here was complete.

Minto was taken quietly and in the dead of night just a few hours after Absar was burned to a crisp in an abandoned building in an industrial area of the city. Neither Minto nor his men were ever heard of again, nor did they ever see the inside of a court of justice.

Meanwhile, Kamal's performance in Karachi had set him firmly on a road he coveted, headed straight to the Jungle.

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CHAPTER 4

It was two in the morning when he placed the call. He hadn't taken into account the time difference between Pakistan and Virginia, meaning that the call would ring unanswered in an empty office. Northwright's undercover asset had let his impatience get the better of him and the value of the information that he held would lose significance if not passed immediately. His call would have given Northwright an operational advantage because the rest of the organization would not know for days, as it worked through official channels in Pakistan. *This call had to get through*, he thought to himself.

Realizing his mistake, the operative dropped the call and quickly searched his clunky mobile for Northwright's private cell number and hit send. A groggy, sleep-deprived Northwright stirred in his mistress's bed as he phone rang on the table beside him. Unwillingly, he rolled away from the twenty-five-year-old plaything in his arms, trying to find his phone in the dark before his mistress woke. Late night calls were normally routed through the control center and they all knew not to call him here, *especially* here. Married for almost thirty years, this was his only escape from the covert world that he spent his life in. More importantly, Nicole, his mistress, knew nothing of what he actually did for a living. To her, he was a businessman with a bad marriage; all she really cared about were the expensive gifts and being pampered in exchange for her body.

David Northwright was a seasoned intelligence operative trained in the South American killing fields. From his days fifteen years ago as a lowly field operative to his final posting as Station Chief in Bogota, he had established a vicious history of kidnapping and torture. He had a special position on every wet team the Company assembled simply because of his bloodlust and skill.

Now, as a retired operative, he worked for the highest bidder doing whatever he was asked to do. The loyalty and brotherhood taught at the Company was leveraged to bring his 'favorites' to the dark world he now ruled.

As Northwright rubbed the sleep from his eyes and read the number, he realized that the perceived change in protocol was much more significant.

"Hold for encrypted communication," in a barely-comprehensible voice, Northwright gruffly spoke into the phone.

"Sir, we have a problem," blurted the caller immediately. "Minto is missing and Absar is dead."

Northwright hung up. The encryption had not yet activated. *Fucking idiot. Don't they teach these guys anything?* As a known player in geopolitical espionage, Northwright could be sure that a number of intelligence ears had heard the information, but there was a slim possibility that no one would connect the significance to him. *Can't risk any communication breaches*, he thought to himself. He shut off his cell phone and with a practiced flip of the wrist, he opened it up and removed the SIM. Reaching down to pull a Zippo from his pants pocket, he got out of the bed, his mind on the seven words he had heard before he had disconnected the call. His mistress stirred in the bed, realizing he was not beside her.

"Why are you up?" she muttered half asleep, reaching for Northwright's shadow.

"Sorry darling, had a nightmare," Northwright quickly answered, hoping that she would fall back into a deep sleep. "Kind of unsettling. Go back to sleep, I'm going to pop out on the balcony for a smoke."

Nicole, now more aware, slid over and wrapped her arms around his waist, strategically placing her hands. "Let me help you relax. We can have a smoke together...after."

Northwright fingered the SIM between his fingers, contemplating whether being insistent on a cigarette would raise additional questions, or worse, bring his plaything completely out of her slumber wanting to discuss the nightmare. Northwright knew that with the SIM in his hand, all tracking mechanisms were defeated, as were the NSA's ability to use his phone as a listening device. He could destroy the SIM later, he thought as he slid back into bed, and Nicole did what earned her the expensive gifts.

The sheer size of the ISI Academy campus intimidated Kamal. The Jungle, as it was known among the rank and file, sprawled over 5,000 acres of land situated in a location that no one would ever find without a map and a guide. As he was driven down the tree-lined road to the large granite building in the center, Kamal couldn't help but compare this to his training bases at The Bird's Nest and Attock Fort. The granite building stood alone amidst a beautifully manicured lawn with flags of the various branches of the armed forces flying above. The rest of the grounds were populated with forest, endless and vast, which would most likely be used as a training ground. Exiting the vehicle, Kamal was ushered into the building by a soldier in full military dress, while another took his baggage from the car. In the foyer, he was given a file with his room assignment, rules, agenda for the day and course list. The soldier directed him towards a door guarded by two more men in full dress uniform.

He entered a large hall where, he guessed, noticing the long benches and tables lining the sides of the room, they would serve lunch. The hall was massive, a double level affair with galleries along the second floor that overlooked the room. And it was crowded. Kamal stopped in his tracks, momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer size and magnitude of the space. He focused his attention on the men closest to him, trying to find familiar faces among the crowd. He knew of several SSG batch mates and seniors who had been accepted into the Jungle.

No one looked over. Kamal moved forward through the buzzing room, scoping it out. He easily identified testosterone-filled infantry soldiers from the raucous laughter and loud jokes. In contrast, air force and navy representatives were quiet and refined, speaking in low murmurs in small groups.

“Oye, *baanchod*! What the hell are you doing here?”

That voice...Kamal turned towards Major Iftikhar Siddiqui, a former instructor at The Bird's Nest during his SSG training, psyched to see a friendly face. The Major was a solid figure, built like a compact truck with a booming voice. His friendly greeting had several heads turning towards him, but the Major was impervious to the affronted stares. He gestured to Kamal to join them.

“Welcome to the Jungle!” the Major grabbed Kamal's hand and pulled him forward to introduce him to his group. “Gentlemen, this is Captain Kamal Khan, a former student of mine.”

“Sir.” Kamal nodded formally to the group, most of whom were a blur of names and uniforms. *This is a bloody convention on good posture*, he thought as he took in the ramrod straight stance of everyone around him. He turned back to the Major. “Will you be our counter-terrorism instructor here as well?”

“I'll join you for the advanced courses, but SSG soldiers are exempt from basic training,” the Major said with a wicked smile. “I get the boys first.” He cocked his head towards a small group huddled together in a corner of the giant room. “My job is to turn them into men.”

Kamal hadn't noticed the small group — they seemed to be shrinking into their skins, intimidated and quiet. “The boys?”

“Civilians.” Coming from the Major, it sounded like a dirty word.

Kamal's brows went up in surprise. “Civilians? I thought...”

“We have a civilian division, Kamal. I thought you knew that.” The Major was amused. “They're political appointees, or federal service commission candidates.”

“Basic training with these guys is a load of fun.” One of the Major's friends, a slim-built man sporting a fantastic handlebar mustache, was blatantly staring at the ‘boys’. “They're untested, undisciplined and unprepared, lacking the essential skills that every soldier here has.”

“And unfit.” The group's contempt for the civilian population in the room was obvious.

“Our only saving grace is that they'll never get to field or covert service.”

Kamal felt bad for the boys, but he was surprised that the ISI accepted political appointees. “Where are they normally posted?”

“Analysis. They're given access to the most inconsequential data to limit the opportunities to share intelligence for financial gain.”

“There are two things to remember about civilians in the ISI.” Ziad, the handlebar mustache guy, took the opportunity to teach the newbie a few things. “First, political appointees are likely to be snitches for the party in power. They work for them, for individuals, not the country. Second, they're also far more likely to be turned or exposed if allowed into the field. We've seen this happen with the CIA, FSB and MI6 for years now.”

“Our legacy, though, is in this room.” The Major nodded to the plaques on the wall celebrating successful ISI operations, each with a date and detail but no operative names. On the wall to his right were photographs of past Directors General of the ISI since its inception in 1948 by General Robert Cawthome, an Australian born British Army Major General who later joined the Pakistan Army. The whole room reflected the glorious history of the intelligence services. “We pander to civilian sensibilities by allowing them to feel like a part of us. It hasn’t slowed us down yet.”

“Attention!” The soldiers outside the door had entered, and the room snapped to attention at the command. Almost all of them, that is; the civilians, unused to reacting to orders, stood shifting their weight from side to side, as if standing in a school assembly. One of the soldiers noticed the disrespect of the order and surged towards the two who were most unsteady. Kamal watched, remembering his first days in basic training. *Oh shit*, he thought. *Those guys are about to get their first drill.*

“Stand up straight! Do you think that this is your mother’s living room?” spat the soldier in his face. “You know you don’t belong here! Tell us whose influence you used to get into this Academy. *Stand fucking still, maggot!*” The poor man leaned back, desperately trying to avoid the soldier’s spittle as he got yelled at. But he stood up straight, looking at the uniformed soldiers’ stances and mimicking them to the best of his ability. It wasn’t good enough for his assailant, however, who took his time yelling out the finer points of standing to attention.

“We will break you! We will turn you into men from the boys you are now.”

A second instructor, and then a third stepped forward to straighten out the civilian population of the room. The military candidates stood watching, making no attempt to hide their contempt. The volume increased exponentially as the instructors took each individual’s weaknesses and beat them over the head with them.

The civvies did their best to follow the orders, perhaps for the first time in their over-privileged, coddled lives, eventually falling into some semblance of order and discipline. A hush fell over the room as the soldier at the door straightened his rifle and yelled “Attention!” a second time.

A wave passed through the room as the uniformed soldiers snapped to salutes, heads stiffly facing forward. The Chief of Army Staff and Director General ISI were standing in the doorway. Files for every military candidate in the Academy passed across the desks of these two men during the selection process. The civilians had an easier path with a commission of bureaucrats and military officers, but for those wearing a uniform, these men held the keys to their graduation and future postings as covert operatives.

Kamal had many interactions, granted from a distance, with both these men. Both had attended the SSG graduation and personally congratulated the graduates. He had medals pinned on his chest by the COAS when he returned from Fort Benning’s International Sniper School for his performance and for winning the competition at the end of the course. This would be the first time that he would have more regular interaction and assessment from either man.

Behind the two military officers were members of the federal commission that had been responsible for selecting the civilians to the Academy. As the military officers moved to congratulate and interact with the uniformed personnel, the bureaucrats did the same with the civilians. This was a purely ceremonial practice done at the beginning of each Academy session.

The Generals reached the end of the room and took their respective places behind the podium that had been set up. The Director of the Academy, Brigadier Asif Nazar, was the first to step forward and welcome the candidates to the academy. An accomplished officer with a Sandhurst background like Kamal, the Brigadier didn't seem as daunting as his title, standing just short of six feet with a bit of weight around him. *Looks like the good General has been missing physical training*, Kamal thought to himself.

His address was short, covering his expectations of each candidate at the Academy and what the Academy offered to those who were able to successfully complete training. The Brigadier ended with an introduction to Lieutenant General Misbah Qadir, Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence. He stepped down from the podium as his boss got up to speak.

The Lieutenant General was a striking contradiction to the Brigadier. He had not attended foreign military schools. He was a true son of the Pakistani soil. A graduate of the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul, the Staff College in Quetta and this same ISI Academy, Lt. General Qadir had years of experience in Military Intelligence. He was a natural choice to head the ISI.

"If you are here thinking that this Academy will turn you into James Bond or a super spy that people will write stories about, you need to exercise your ability to walk out that door right now. This is not the place for you if that is your dream." Lt. General Qadir had an imposing voice, deep and raspy. "Pakistani intelligence has always been the most respected intelligence service in the world because of the standards that we instill and uphold in our operatives. We have spent decades earning our position in the espionage community and no one in this room will be allowed to erode it. This service stands as one unit, one force, not individuals. If you decide at any point that you are bigger than the service, you will find yourself outside the service as a target instead of an asset."

"This is the beginning, but how it ends, only those who graduate know," he continued. "We will teach you what it means to be a warrior in the true sense of the word, following a code that embodies integrity, loyalty, honor, selflessness and courage as your guide. You will learn to understand the phrase that every warrior lives by — Never ask how many are the enemy, just where they are."

He spoke with great passion and honor about the achievements and the great men who had made them possible, but just as the plaques on the wall remained anonymous, he never mentioned a name. *The service was supreme*, Kamal thought to himself, *and we are a part of that supremacy as long as the service allowed it.*

“Intelligence is a game of imperfect information. We can guess our opponent’s moves, but we can’t be sure of them until the game is over. As you will learn during your courses and your time here, this it is not a game. The risks we take are real, and sometimes deadly. We move chess pieces, countering the moves of our opponents, on an imaginary board that could be confined to the location we are in or spread across the entire globe. This is real-time strategy implementation. It isn’t for the weak of heart, it is for those who have the mental drive to be more than they ever imagined.”

The Jungle launched a set of vital concepts for Kamal’s training and career as an operative — the need to know, the need to compartmentalize and the need to validate intelligence and its sources. The first briefings provided the foundation of his espionage education. During training, the candidates were regularly shuffled to locations where their instructors had organized ‘teachable’ moments. Sometimes the prepared location would be on the sprawling 5,000 acres, others could be hundreds of kilometers away. Kamal had a slight advantage over many of his batch mates because of the counter-intelligence training during the SSG course, but that slight advantage became much greater with his actual field experience.

The instructors at The Jungle, discounting a few devout Muslims, were alcohol-swilling spies ranging from good to amazing. They included seasoned officers like Colonel Akbar, a veteran of the Afghan conflict and a key trainer of the Mujahideen, and non-military personnel like Doctor Waqar Shah, a specialist in psychological warfare. Some had served as station chiefs, or cultural attachés as they were known to the outsiders, others were masters of covert operations whose tradecraft behind enemy lines had become the stuff of legend within the ranks of the military, keeping operations and operatives alive. They had worked in India, the United States, North Korea, China, Israel and other countries, both friendly and unfriendly to Pakistan.

Other instructors included paramilitary specialists, field operatives and linguists that would help to get the candidates ready for situations and encounters that they would need to extract themselves from. One thing was made clear to all the candidates — if you are caught behind enemy lines, the ISI will distance itself from you.

In other words, you’re fucked six ways from Sunday, Kamal thought to himself. That made the requirement to absorb information quickly and clearly imperative for every candidate. It would be their own skills that would get them out of hot water and to safety — the institution would not be able to save them until they were clear of all threats and then only if the intelligence was valuable to the institution, military and state of Pakistan. The Jungle was replete with stories of operatives that had been turned out into the cold when their objectives went belly up and didn’t deliver quality intelligence to the headquarters.

The heart of intelligence, no matter how you looked at it, was human espionage. The best intelligence came from an operative's ability to understand and influence behavior, from polite conversation to overt threats, and maneuver through emotional cycles to get valuable information unavailable to others. This intelligence was the foundation of covert actions, which were in the realm of statecraft, a tool of foreign policy decision-makers. Those who excelled in this level of espionage were elevated to recruiters, the holy grail of spies, that were able to identify, engage and convince foreign nationals to turn against their own interests for personal rewards. The candidates were told that the ISI kept a list of politicians, bureaucrats and other influential people who had fallen into this trap and used that information to influence decisions on foreign policy and domestic matters.

"The greatest skill of any operative," Colonel Akbar explained, "is the ability to communicate." Communication was crucial to every facet of the intelligence gathering process. It did not matter if you were an expert at covert operations and influencing people. If you were unable to communicate that information back to the handlers in an understandable and actionable form, then you held less value. Decisions were not made based on the words of an operative, but on the quality of his reports. Every instructor in every course taught the candidates how to prepare reports ranging from intelligence briefings for 'customers', to operational and diplomatic cables. The focus was on quality of reporting so that it could be acted upon effectively.

Kamal surprised himself with the results of these classes. He wasn't a talkative person, and didn't consider himself a great communicator. He had always been solitary, and made few friends at The Jungle, except for those he had known coming in to the academy.

"It's not about volume, Kamal." Major Iftikhar shared a smoke with Kamal after lunch almost every day. "I think that's what's surprising you — you manage to say what you need in just a few words. It makes you a great communicator in my book."

"Thank you, Major." Kamal took the praise a little wryly. "It's an old habit of mine — I learned to be careful with my words around my dad." At the Major's questioning look, Kamal brushed aside any explanation. "I'll tell you about it...someday."

They had developed a bond during his time at The Bird's Nest, where Iftikhar had been one of his many instructors. Kamal had piqued his interest early in his commando training with his tenacity and unwillingness to accept defeat. The more time he spent with the young sniper, the more respect he developed for him. After Kamal earned his maroon beret, the two had stayed in touch as much as two serving soldiers could. When he walked in the door at The Jungle, Iftikhar saw it as an opportunity to impart the knowledge that he had gained during his two tours in the ISI.

The two would regularly sit together in the evenings, discussing his course material, techniques to better gather intelligence from unwilling participants and how to defeat the standard interrogation methods that were implemented against intelligence operatives. Some of these sessions included teachable moments where Iftikhar would create a situation from the surroundings. On one such evening, they sat enjoying dinner when Iftikhar noticed that Kamal had drawn the attention of an attractive young woman. She, however, was with her parents, making the challenge significantly more interesting for him.

“She seems to be quite interested in you,” Iftikhar noticed. “You should talk to her.”

“Who?” Kamal replied nonchalantly.

“You’re kidding, right?” Iftikhar asked. “You haven’t noticed the young lady who has been trying to get your attention for the last twenty minutes? Maybe you aren’t as observant as I thought, Kamal,” he quipped laughing.

“Come on *yaar*, she’s with her family,” Kamal retorted. “Unapproachable,” he observed drawing a devious smile from Iftikhar.

“You think people will just come to you and hand over information?” he asked. “Sometimes they are unapproachable and you still have to get the information. If you’re going to disregard anyone who is unapproachable...well...maybe you should just quit The Jungle now,” he replied, stone-faced.

“What exactly are you asking for, Iftikhar?”

“Three things,” he said knowing that he had goaded Kamal into another game that would both entertain him while teaching Kamal. “First, get her name. Second, separate her from her family. Last, get her phone number.”

“Now, I know you’re joking,” Kamal said with a grin. “All of those are impossible.”

“One more thing, Captain,” Iftikhar added. “You have five minutes to do all three,” he said glancing at his watch.

Kamal sat stunned for a moment trying to determine if his mentor was serious. When he realized that Iftikhar’s eyes were glued to his watch, he knew this was another one of his games.

Kamal assessed the environment, looking for a tactic that would allow him to approach the family and facilitate his three objectives. Looking down at the menu, he found his opening and slowly got up from the table.

“Excuse me sir, I apologize for interrupting your meal,” Kamal said placing his hand on the father’s shoulder. The father looked up at him, wondering who the hell he was.

“My friend and I were watching how much you were enjoying your meal and hoped that we could ask what you were having,” Kamal politely continued.

The father was a bit surprised at the question, but Kamal’s good-natured politeness encouraged him to discuss the meal. “This is the...what is this...my daughter ordered the food,” he said motioning to the young lady across from him. “Laila, what did you order for me?”

Laila smiled as she looked at Kamal. “Abbu, that is the chicken Manchurian. Is it good?”

“It’s excellent, *beta*,” the father replied. Kamal, seeing his opening, turned his attention to the older woman at the table. “Ma’am, are you having the same thing?”

The woman glowed from the attention from the good-looking young man. “Oh, no *beta*. This is sweet and sour.”

“Ah, one of my personal favorites,” Kamal replied with a smile. “Laila, right?” Kamal asked pointing to the young lady. “You have something different than your parents. May I ask what that is?”

“This is zhajiangmian — noodles with sauce,” she said proudly, able to pronounce the name without a stumble.

“Zhajangman?” Kamal stammered out, slaughtering the name, but causing Laila to laugh with his attempt. “How do you say that again?”

“Zha-ji-ang-mian,” she said slowly enunciating the syllables for Kamal, who shook his head, pretending he would never be able to pronounce it correctly.

“Sir, could I ask a favor?” Kamal politely asked. “If you could spare your daughter for a moment, I’m a novice when it comes to good Chinese food and it’s my friend’s birthday. I would like him to have something interesting to eat and honestly, there is no way I’m going to remember how to pronounce that.”

The look on the father’s face changed from a laughing man to a protective father, scowling at Kamal’s request. The mother, on the other hand, gently nudged her daughter to help the kind man. “Go ahead, help the boy, Laila,” she said smiling at Kamal the whole time. She looked at him like a potential *daamad* for her young daughter who checked all the required boxes — young, good looking, polite and well-spoken.

Laila excused herself from the table and went with Kamal to the waiter station. Kamal called over a waiter and asked Laila to place the order for him.

“So what do you recommend?” Kamal asked, as the waiter joined them. Laila glanced over at Iftikhar and turned her attention to the menu. While she was considering the dishes, Kamal quietly mentioned that he had noticed that she was trying to get his attention before he came over to the table. She blushed, caught in her own game, and rattled off four dishes to the waiter, trying to divert the conversation.

“I’d like to call you some time. Maybe speak when your parents aren’t listening to every word,” he said with a smile, shielding her from her parent’s table as he slid a pen and paper to her. She hesitated for a second, making Kamal wonder if he had misread the situation, and then quickly took the pen, writing out an email address along with her phone number.

“Let’s talk on email and chat first,” she said sliding the paper back to him.

Kamal smiled, slipping it into his pocket, before turning and escorting her back to her parent’s table.

“Sir, if you would allow,” Kamal said. “For your kindness, I would like to buy you all dessert in honor of my friend’s birthday.”

The father protested, but Kamal insisted, calling the waiter over to the table. “Tell their server that they will be having dessert and to add it to my bill.”

Kamal smiled, thanking Laila and her family for their assistance and returned to his own table.

Iftikhar tapped the face of his Timex. “Seven minutes,” he said as Kamal sat down.

“Two minutes over, but I got 4 out of 3 objectives.”

Iftikhar’s eyebrow raised, “4 out of 3, how’s that?”

“Name, Laila. She joined me at the insistence of her mother.”

“That’s two, Kamal.”

“Phone number *and* email address. She would like to write and chat before speaking on the phone,” Kamal added with a smirk. “Four out of three.”

“Impressive, recruit. Now, tell me this,” Iftikhar sat up in his chair. “Assess each person sitting at the table.”

“The father is traditional, maybe central Punjab based on his accent. The mother is Lahori. She is looking for a suitor for her daughter and thought she hit the jackpot with me,” Kamal said softly so that nearby tables wouldn’t overhear him. “Laila is a modern girl, studying in one of the private colleges. You can see from the number of times she has looked over here since I sat down that she’s interested.”

Iftikhar returned to his reclined position and grinned, satisfied with the way the game played out. “So, are you going to pursue?”

Kamal thought for a second, looked over at Laila and smiled. Turning back to Iftikhar, he said, “Why not? Look at her.”

Most of Iftikhar’s teachable moments involved approaching women, Kamal had noted long ago. In this society, men didn’t just walk up to women and start conversations. That was just not done. So the challenge of being able to glean the required information was much harder and a better test compared to the staged, controlled exercises at The Jungle. Plus, Kamal thought, Iftikhar enjoyed watching Kamal get cut down to size by the women he approached. *His entertainment value at my expense.*

Instructors at The Jungle regularly tested the candidates on their ability to differentiate between fact-based intelligence and intuition, speculation and conjecture. Candidates were required to separate intelligence from operational information.

Years later, in the middle of a desperate mission, Kamal would remember one particular exercise they went through on a regular basis — an exercise that routinely got him out of hot water. He was introduced, over a course of several days, to ten people playing different roles in different places. Each told him ten different versions of the same story. His job was to find the intelligence and the operational information, as well as identify which of the ten could be recruited and how. In other exercises, the tables were turned to see how much information others could get from Kamal, with methods varying from gentle inquiries to hard interrogation tactics. All of the information would be drafted into an intelligence report that would be parsed by the instructor, leaving Kamal to wonder whether he had caught the right threads and identified the right people. This, much to Kamal’s consternation, was a daily event at The Jungle.

The psychological training was peppered with tactical driving, close quarter combat, survival training, surveillance tactics and interrogation techniques to make the candidate a stronger operative, if they graduated with high enough marks to be put in the field. The goal of The Jungle was to create top-level operatives that could be posted to different stations around the world to gather intelligence, recruit potential spies and report back actionable information. Oh, and to stay alive in the harshest of conditions.

Kamal had excelled in the art of tradecraft and human espionage. He also tested very high in linguistics and intelligence gathering skills. His only weakness was his rudimentary knowledge of international affairs. As a result, there were stacks of history books, magazines and newspapers on his desk in the hostel. As his instructors regularly reminded him, he had to understand the history of the cultures to be able to effectively influence them.

He was luckier than most. His civilian classmates were almost all taking extra fitness training, including ten-mile hikes and runs through the forest.

“It’s not fucking fair,” said Irfan, one of the weakest members of the civilian students; Kamal irked him. “You get to lay in bed reading a stupid newspaper while I have to kill myself on the track every day!”

Kamal gave him a cold look. He’d joined the military because classroom studies bored him, and here he was, with his nose stuck in a book. The last thing he needed was a sniveling idiot whining about being out in the fresh air. “There’s no such thing as an easy day at the office in the intelligence world. Get used to it.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When people talk about Khalid Muhammad, they talk about an entrepreneur who has helped others build their dreams and businesses. They talk about a teacher, who is dedicated to his students, both inside and outside the classroom, and they return the dedication tenfold. Now, they talk about the author, who has written a fast-paced, action-packed spy thriller about Pakistan, the politics, the Army and terrorism.

Born in Pakistan's troubled Swat Valley, educated and raised in the United States, Khalid returned to Pakistan almost 17 years ago and fell in love with his country. His debut novel, Agency Rules - Never an Easy Day at the Office, is a journey behind the headlines about Pakistan, the world's most dangerous place, to deliver an intense story that will challenge the reader to question what they have been told.

Khalid Muhammad

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WHAT THE CRITICS SAY...

“A comparison to works by LeCarre has been made by a fellow reader and while I would hate to imply that there are obvious similarities I will say that the two authors have certainly the same admirable competence in strong plotting, vivid characterization and atmospheric style.

Pakistan and its people are often misrepresented in the Western world and I loved how the author managed to bring in a whole spectrum of characters, showing again a complex picture instead of resorting to simple stereotypes or clique; all the while also highlighting outside interests in the country and the internal struggles. While the story moves at a fast pace with compelling writing the author also raises many points about the country's current state of affairs. It shows a writer with a sharp and thoughtful mind who knows also about diplomacy and international politics - just like any good spy thriller writer should in my opinion. A good thriller with substance. Very recommendable.”

– *Christoph Fischer, author of The Three Nations Trilogy*

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“I thought that this was going to be quite a difficult read for me because on top of the plot complexity of a spy novel there would be the unfamiliar names and places because it was set in Pakistan. So I started off with my laptop beside me open to Google Maps and Wikipedia only to discover that the story was delivered in such an easily digestible way that I hardly had to refer to either. There were a lot of unfamiliar names of people and places at first but they started to sort themselves out as the plot advanced, leading in to a fascinating world of secrets, lies, subterfuge and scandal, not to mention gangs and bribery and corruption reaching right to the top of the government.”

- *Karen Prince, author of Lost Kingdoms of Karibu*

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“The story moves at an amazing pace, just like any good spy thriller writer should, and there is a bewildering succession of names and situations to grip and often confuse the reader. Gripping because Khalid Muhammad's imagination and writing has you constantly on the edge of your seat to find out what happens next. I am loathe to describe in detail much of the plot since I am of the opinion that this can prove too much of a spoiler for potential readers of the book. Our hero, Kamal Khan, turns out to be not only a skilled engager of covert operations and gung-ho fighter, as we expect, but also a ruthless interrogator of suspects. This encourages one to ponder with suspicion the reality of events that we may regularly read about in the news media...I can happily compare this first novel to those of Frederick Forsyth (The Afghan, Dogs of War) and Jack Higgins (The Judas Gate), for its verve and ability to capture the imagination.

I look forward to seeing more from this exciting new writer.”

- *G.J. Griffiths, author of Fallen Hero*